

# Squeaky wheels

*Cape Wind* chronicles consternation among the swells on Nantucket Sound

BY CHARLES EUCHNER

**THE SPECTER OF** little toothpicks twirling on the horizon of Nantucket Sound is causing fits among the political elites who make summer a verb on Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket. On overcast days, they wouldn't see anything but the soft line separating water from sky. But on sunny days . . .

Those toothpicks are what you may one day see of a wind farm located five miles off the southern coast of Cape Cod. Some 130 turbines—dispersed over 25 square miles in the 550 square miles of Nantucket Sound—would stand as high as 440 feet above the surface of the water. The turbines would produce 1.5 megawatt hours of energy, enough to cover three-fourths of the electricity needed on the Cape and Islands, home to 250,000 year-round residents and three times as many people during the summer.

Cape Wind is the dream of an entrepreneur named Jim Gordon. A kid from Newton who discovered nature at the West End Club's summer camp in New Hampshire, Gordon earned millions selling energy-saving devices and building natural-gas plants in New England.

In 2001, Gordon and other entrepreneurs started talking about bringing wind power to Massachusetts. He now promises that Cape Wind will lead to the reduction of 734,000 tons of greenhouse gas emissions a year—good news for an area long dirtied by power plants and auto congestion.

Even more important, a wind farm could help make Massachusetts a leader in alternative energy. And who could be against windmills?

In their chatty book *Cape Wind*, published by New York-based Public Affairs, journalists Wendy Williams and Robert Whitcomb tell us exactly who. By their reckoning, the long and often nasty debate about Gordon's project is all about the privilege and hypocrisy of the upper class.

At the beginning of the approval process, Gordon visited Spiro Mitrokostas, the executive director of the Cape Cod Technology Council, who agreed that the project had lots of potential for creating new jobs as well as energy. But Mitrokos-

tas warned Gordon: "Only two or three hundred people run the Cape. If you don't have them on your side, forget it. If Ted doesn't like this, you're going to have a problem."

Indeed, liberal heroes like U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy, journalist Walter Cronkite, and historian David McCullough opposed Cape Wind because it threatened to alter their posh vacation spots. (Cronkite has since switched sides.)



The Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound quickly raised \$15 million—a coming-together of old and new money—from such people as Listerine heiress Bunny Mellon, Paul Fireman of Reebok, and Richard Egan of EMC. The group produced a powerful infomercial with Cronkite's authoritative voiceover, dominated town meetings, and exploited the arcane parliamentary maneuvers of Washington.

The rhetoric against the wind farm went far beyond the initial outcry about the toothpick horizon. Opponents said the project would:

- produce a "killing field," with turbine blades slicing birds that flew in the area;
- cause awful noise pollution;
- devastate the animal life of Nantucket Sound, including sea lions and diverse schools of fish;
- interfere with air travel, especially at Nantucket and other local airports;
- ruin navigation in the area, threatening vital shipping industries;
- destroy the appearance of the whole area and cripple the tourism industry, just as surely as putting a Motel 6 in the middle of the California redwoods or in Florida's Everglades.

Williams and Whitcomb do a good job tracking and refuting charges. Many of the claims lacked any data (even though Gordon showed a willingness to sponsor independent research). Other claims were clearly wrong.

When the policy arguments failed, activists attacked Gordon personally. In a radio debate, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. told him, “You’re a developer here who is trying to make a buck, and you’re trying to do it by imposing your costs on the public.” The Alliance placed a full-page ad in *Roll Call*, a Washington paper devoted to covering Capitol Hill. WHY IS THIS MAN SMILING?, a headline asked. Nearby, a cartoon showed Gordon clutching money while stepping onto a boat in the sound.

Williams and Whitcomb ask why Ted Kennedy—whom they consider a legislative genius working behind the scenes to subvert the project—is so adamant against Cape Wind.

The authors find their Rosebud in an encounter between Kennedy and Jim Liedell, a retired utility executive. According to Liedell, a supporter of the project, he approached Kennedy at a summer concert in Hyannis. The scene is reminiscent of Cindy Lou Who asking the Grinch why he’s taking the Christmas tree.

Liedell asked him why he opposed the project. “The developer’s not paying anything,” Kennedy reportedly answered. But Jim Gordon said he would be willing to pay, said Liedell. “That’s peanuts,” responded Kennedy. Any other reasons for opposing the project? “The sight of them bothers me,” Kennedy said. But even on crystal clear days, the turbines would be mere wisps on the horizon. Is that so bad?

Then, says Liedell, came the ultimate answer from the senator. “But don’t you realize,” Kennedy said, “that’s where I sail.”

Is this how politics really works? Does Ted Kennedy really oppose Cape Wind with such ferocity just because he does not want to lose some of the mystique of piloting his 50-foot craft wherever he wants in the waters near his estate?

**INTENTIONALLY OR NOT,** Williams and Whitcomb have written a case study that could fit neatly in the 1956 classic *The Power Elite*, by C. Wright Mills. In that book, Mills argues that political, economic, and military elites occupy a tight network that shares a common worldview and makes common cause on important issues. Elections and other political activity matter, but only within the boundaries of the elites’ system.

Jim Gordon has survived this obstacle course—so far—because he has had ample supplies of both money and tenacity. The Cape Wind story might, then, be seen as the ultimate proof of Mills’s argument. Elites only lose when another elite comes along!

The problem with the elite theory is that it doesn’t consider the absolute messiness of politics. Whatever its reputation as a liberal sandbox, where policy-makers can build all kinds of crazy new programs, our state is a prime example of politics by complexity and confusion, timing

and luck.

Massachusetts state and local government has grown like Topsy over the years, with only occasional and weak efforts to shake out obsolete, redundant, contradictory, and irrelevant regulations and agencies. Since politics gets so tangled in process, no one really knows whether good projects can make it through the system. Whatever you try to do—build housing, rehab an old hospital, open a school, fix a park—you know that someone is going to use some arcane process to block you. If such a process doesn’t exist, they’ll invent a new one.

When Gordon proposed Cape Wind, he was challenged by the mind-bending system of Massachusetts politics as much as by the elites of Nantucket Sound. The review by the state’s Energy Facilities Siting Board alone took almost three years and produced 2,900 pages of documents. RFK Jr. told Jim Gordon, “I’ve seen grocery stores on the Cape that go through more of a permit process than this project,” and he wasn’t completely wrong. But he missed the larger truth that the state poses absurd barriers to all kinds of good projects.

Even when Gordon lined up allies, funded independent research, made his case before every civic body, and jumped through all the legal and political hoops, he still had to worry about the losers changing the rules in the middle of the game.

Consider one effort in Washington to quash the project, through something called the Environmentally Responsible Wind Power Act of 2005. This bill, introduced by Sens. Lamar Alexander of Tennessee and Ted Stevens of Alaska, would deny wind energy permits to any site within 20 miles of a shoreline, national park, or wildlife refuge, and would allow states to veto wind farms within 20 miles of their borders. In other words, wind power would be banned in virtually all of America. The bill didn’t get out of committee.

The good news is that it looks like Cape Wind is going to happen. Though still wary of possible lawsuits and more legislative hanky-panky, project officials expect to complete federal, state, and local permitting by the end of 2008. From the time the company begins driving pilings for the bases of the turbines, they expect to begin delivering energy in another two years.

We say it all the time, but forget too often: The region’s economy will thrive only if we constantly reinvent the economy, using the brainpower and chutzpah of people like Jim Gordon.

When will we know that Cape Wind has succeeded? When tourists are spotted on the Cape and Islands wearing chic T-shirts with images of spinning toothpicks. **CW**

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